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Drugs and Insurgents in Colombia A Regional Conundrum

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Drug trafficking and political insurgency in Colombia could well confront the United States with the most serious security challenge in the Western Hemisphere since the Central American wars of the 1980s. The second-oldest democracy in Latin America, Colombia is a strategically important country that lies adjacent to Venezuela's oil fields, the Panama Canal, and the Caribbean basin. Colombia's political trajectory will influence the direction of broader trends in the unstable Andean region and beyond.

To date, the United States' response to Colombia's crisis has been limited to the provision of military assistance and technical support to the Colombian government's counternarcotics effort. However, Colombia's narcotics and insurgency problems are so intimately intertwined that dealing effectively with one will almost certainly involve dealing with the other. U.S. policymakers and military planners therefore have a compelling need to gain further insight into the intricacies of Colombia's internal crisis.

In *Colombian Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and Its Implications for Regional Stability*, RAND authors Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk address this need by focusing on the sources of Colombian instability and by defining the major players in the country's internal conflicts. The authors then outline the Colombian government's response to its internal crisis as well as the impact of current U.S. assistance programs. The study concludes by examining possible scenarios for Colombia's future, assessing their implications for the security of neighboring states and suggesting how U.S. policy toward the region might best be redefined.

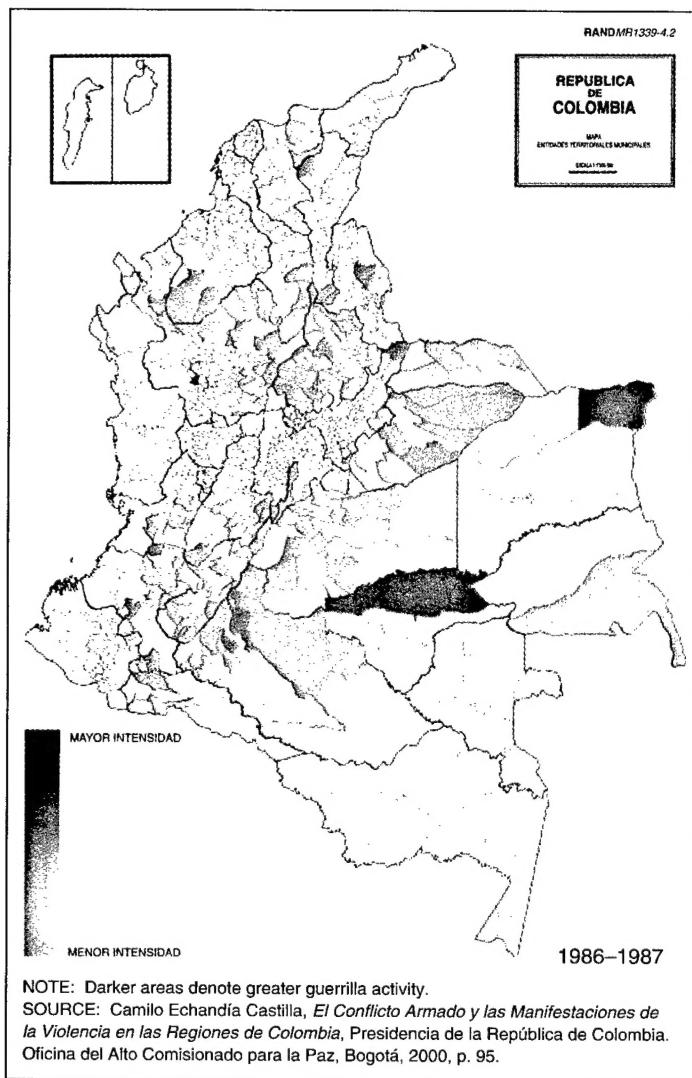
COLOMBIA'S THREEFOLD CHALLENGE

Although Communist guerrilla forces have been active in Colombia since the mid-1960s, it was not until

the 1980s that Colombia witnessed an entirely new phenomenon: the linking of an armed Marxist insurgency with the country's ubiquitous drug cartels. This trend began when it became amply evident to Colombia's rebel forces—particularly to its largest guerrilla organization, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)—that tapping Colombia's drug-related activities would provide them with the resources they needed to intensify their struggle. Further compounding this problem has been the emergence in Colombia of illegal armed groups known as self-defense forces or paramilitaries. The combined effects of this three-sided civil conflict have severely eroded Colombian society, diminishing the authority of its central government and accelerating its social and economic deterioration.

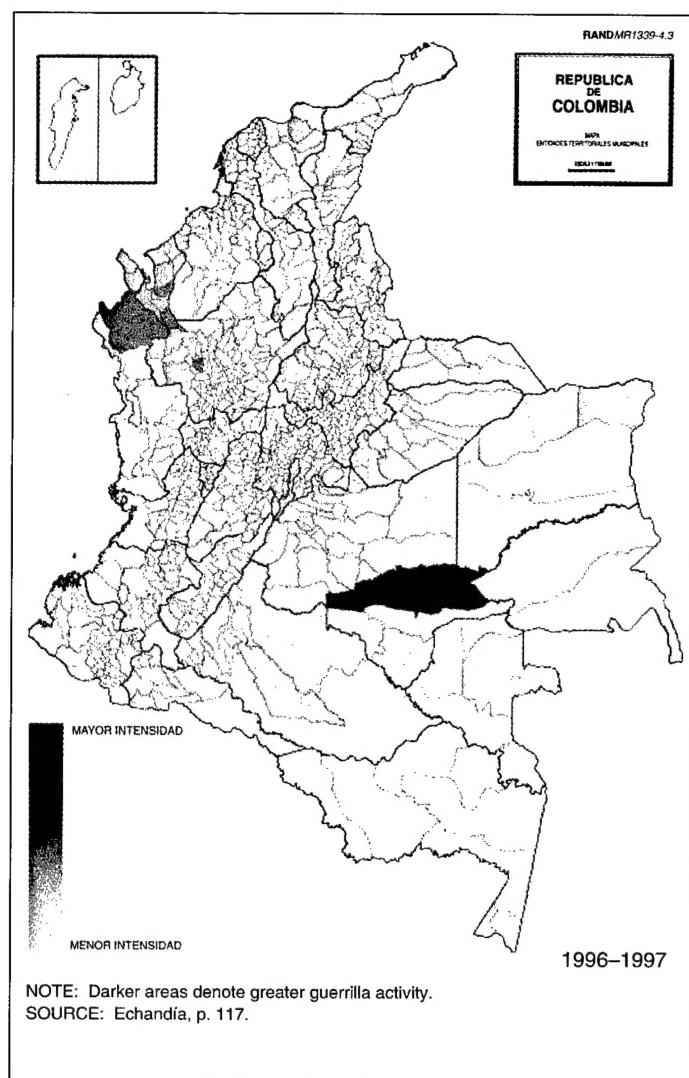
Over the past decade, the Colombian government has had difficulty containing the guerrillas and has lost control of large areas of the countryside to the FARC (see maps on the next page). After having suffered particularly devastating defeats at the hands of the FARC from 1996 to 1998, the Colombian military began to adapt and modernize its forces and, as a result, has scored some tactical successes. At the same time, however, the FARC continues to pose a formidable challenge as it pursues military and political objectives.

Colombia's self-defense groups, or paramilitaries, present a different sort of challenge. Although originally formed to protect the populace against Communist insurgents, these groups have in recent years developed alliances with drug-trafficking and other illegal forces. To the extent that they are a product of an environment of insecurity brought about by the state's weakness, the paramilitaries will continue to be a factor in Colombia's crisis. For the Colombian government, however, the dilemma is whether to treat these groups as legitimate political actors or as criminals to be suppressed.



NOTE: Darker areas denote greater guerrilla activity.

SOURCE: Camilo Echandía Castilla, *El Conflicto Armado y las Manifestaciones de la Violencia en las Regiones de Colombia*, Presidencia de la República de Colombia. Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz, Bogotá, 2000, p. 95.



NOTE: Darker areas denote greater guerrilla activity.
SOURCE: Echandía, p. 117.

Expansion of FARC Activity, 1986-1987 to 1996-1997

RESPONDING TO THE CRISIS

U.S. policy toward Colombia, which has aimed largely at controlling the country's drug traffickers and producers, has met with only limited success and has at times proved counterproductive. The United States' efforts to attack the "air bridge" linking Bolivian and Peruvian drug cultivators with Colombian refiners, for example, merely prompted the latter to grow their own base material as well as to diversify into opiates. Similarly, the dismantling of the Cali and Medellin cartels in the early 1990s led only to the disaggregation of Colombia's drug trade into several hundred small cartels that now operate in an atomized—and hence a more elusive—fashion. Indeed, the United States' most publicized action against drug producers—its effort to eradicate crops—has not affected coca production, which has in fact risen over the past three years.

Perhaps the most significant shortcoming of the United States' regional policy, however, lies in its focus. Bogotá's "Plan Colombia"—a multifaceted response to the country's political and military upheaval—has taken as

one of its central goals the reassertion of military authority in areas currently controlled by guerrillas and other non-state actors. The United States' support for Plan Colombia, however, is predicated on a false distinction between fighting the insurgents and suppressing the drug trade. Put simply, the current U.S. approach recognizes the nexus between guerrillas and drugs but insists that U.S. military assistance be used only for antinarcotics purposes and not against the guerrillas themselves. U.S. policymakers must decide whether this distinction can be sustained as it becomes increasingly obvious that the war on drugs cannot be won unless the Colombian government regains control of its territory.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Over the past few decades, the Colombian government has made numerous attempts to restore peace by entering into negotiations with guerrilla forces. To date, however, little if any progress has been made on the fundamental issues such negotiations have sought to address. It thus seems unlikely, at least in the near term, that Colombia will regain stability through the forging of a

comprehensive peace agreement. Other potential scenarios include a stalemate between the government and the guerrillas or the assertion of the government's primacy over guerrilla and other nonstate forces. The worst-case scenario, however, would involve the outright collapse of the Bogotá government and the internationalization of the Colombian conflict. Colombia's neighbors thus fear, with some justification, that they are caught between a hammer and an anvil. They are concerned that aggressive military operations conducted in association with Plan Colombia would drive guerrillas, drug traffickers, and refugees across their borders. Yet they also fear a rebel takeover that could destabilize the entire region.

To address the Colombian crisis more effectively, the United States must develop a proactive strategy that reconciles Colombia's counternarcotics and political-strategic objectives and helps the Colombian government regain control of its territory. An essential part of such a strategy would involve helping Colombia upgrade its armed forces with assistance on the scale needed to redress the currently unfavorable balance of power. The second prong of a proactive U.S. strategy is to work with Colombia's neighbors to prevent spillover and contain the risk of regional destabilization. Only by these means can the United States hope to lift Colombia—and the region as a whole—out of the labyrinth of political instability.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This research brief describes work done for RAND's Project AIR FORCE; it is documented in Colombian Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and Its Implications for Regional Stability, by Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk, MR-1339-AF, 2001, 138 pp., ISBN 0-8330-2994-0, available from RAND Distribution Services (Telephone: 310-451-7002; toll free 877-584-8642; FAX: 310-451-6915; or E-mail: order@rand.org). Abstracts of all RAND documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>). Publications are distributed to the trade by NBN. RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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